

Being in Games

Reimagining the “Thrownness” of ours

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Art History 3513: Art Games

4 May 2020

Introduction

In some of the video games, the character as whom we are going to play is predetermined. We did ourselves choose to start playing the game, but we never choose to be a specific character in most of the circumstances. After a game starts, the only thing we have a choice on is whether we will keep playing, to keep being the character. My interest lies in how this situation we inevitably face in gaming experiences is similar to that in real life we never get to choose as whom we were born. Thinking in this way, if one plays and keeps playing a game in which the protagonist is not to be defined by the player, one recreates the scenario of an individual's "being-in-the-world", as was suggested by Martin Heidegger using the term "thrownness", which makes games of such type become a potential tool for one to reflect on their own existence in the world with a point of view outside their own avatar, the person one is. However, the finite and abstract nature of video games seems to be always suggesting that the "possibility of the impossibility" is more of an illusion than meaning with time one can achieve or do whatever they want without limitations. Even if we neglect the part that mechanics plays, we can't avoid taking the context of a game's world into account, just like, in real life, our personalities and actions are shaped by so many factors outside of our control in a great extent that we don't know what part is left to be called "ourselves" without a single doubt. Borrowing the concept of "thrownness" from Heidegger as an entry point (not necessarily using it in its original sense), this essay aims to provide a possible viewpoint to understand the relationship between the player and their player character in specific games, which can lead us to a place where games are answering one of the most vital questions by its ability to reimagine the "thrownness" of our own.

“Thrownness” in Games

Introduced and used by German philosopher Martin Heidegger, “thrownness” (or ‘Geworfenheit’ in German) is a concept that illustrates the state of humans’ individual existence (Dasein) in the world. Our state of being in the world is “thrownness”, a having been thrown into the world, not necessarily objecting our will, but out of our choice. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains:

This characteristic of Dasein’s Being—this ‘that it is’—is veiled in its “whence” and “whither”, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the “thrownness” of this entity into its “there”; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the “there”. The expression “thrownness” is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over. . . In a state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not in the sense of coming across itself by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood that it has. (Heidegger 174)

In video games that have certain RPG (Role-Playing Game) elements, a state of being thrown into the game world, similar to what Heidegger suggests when describing human existence, usually occurs, when a player is introduced to a character to play as within a fictional game world. “Thrownness” in video games is a state created by certain features of a game’s system, which is why the “thrownness” I suggest here is game-specific.

In order to achieve a state of “thrownness”, a game should be of the RPG genre or have certain RPG elements, for that “for a game to be considered ‘role-playing,’ the players must, on some level, alter their primary sense of identity and develop an alternate self through a process known as identity alteration” (Bowman 11). The character or the world that a player to is

“thrown” into needs to be fully or partially pre-scripted. The player should be making choices with the perspective of the character, not that of the player.

For such a state to maintain, a game needs to have elements that provide a certain extent of freedom (e.g. sandbox, sub-activities, dialogue trees, branching paths, etc.), so that a player needs to actively make choices (including selecting from given options, navigate to a certain point of the map, choose to do activities that are not essential to the story, acting in a certain way) for the character before the character, in order to make progress in the game. In games like *Heavy Rain*, the state of “thrownness” doesn’t apply because the player can’t make choices before options are shown on the screen, hence they are not the character when choosing the options, but as the player themselves. Making choices here is more of a way to interact with the story and explore the prewritten text (even if it is hypertext), not for immersion in the protagonist (which is why a game with “thrownness” usually comes with a sandbox, in which a player can make choices before the story pushes the options ashore).

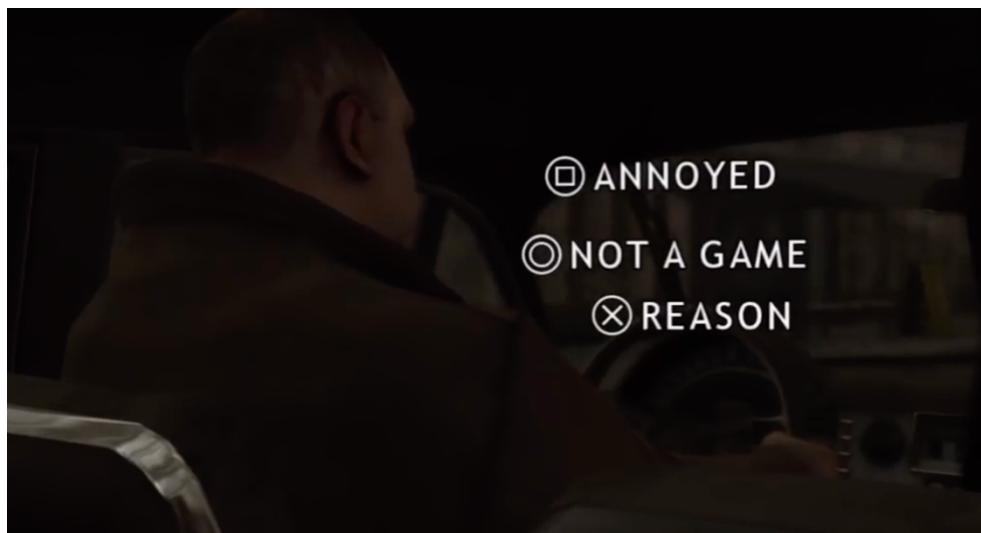


Figure 1. *Heavy Rain*, options appearing on the screen

These choices do not include those that could break the game. For the reason that if a player is not taking responsibility for their choices within the context of the game, a player ceases to become the character, and the life of such a combination of the player and the player character ends (Which I call “suicide” of a character). “Thrownness” in games is a non-rational leap from a player to a preconceived character, like how the exact moment when a dream starts is not to be remembered. When a player is thrown, they become the character.

Different Types of “Thrownness”

In different games, the ways “thrownness” is embodied varies, which can be divided into different levels. The typical kind of “thrownness” can be found mostly in RPG games with a pre-scripted main character, while still having enough freedom and RPG elements for a player to identify with the character. An example could be *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, in which a player becomes Geralt of Rivia, a Witcher. Being a character from a series of fantasy novels by Andrzej Sapkowski, Geralt has had his characteristic developed long before a player becomes him. This is why, in spite of the great quantity, the choices, especially the essential ones, can be made in *Wild Hunt* are limited within those that can reflect Geralt’s personalities (so that the player is always being Geralt in the story). Even though, when a player making a choice from the given options, they are more or less expressing their own interest, they are trapped in the character in the sense that, whatever they choose, Geralt remains himself in the context of the world, hence the highest level of “thrownness”.



Figure 2. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, dialogue options example

In terms of games that have “player-generated character” like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the level of “thrownness” is slightly lower since the player character is open for more customizations (i.e. age, appearances, skills, etc.) than that in *Wild Hunt*. However, there is still a rather high level of “thrownness” since the player is constantly being told that they are a Dragonborn, a chosen individual that has been born with the blood and soul of a dragon, which is not for the player to decide.

The lowest level of “thrownness” can be found in *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* or its equivalent. Instead of a character or a protagonist of a story, *Bannerlord* has its players to appear more as a mere avatar, who has nearly no in-game characteristics that can affect the course of the game with significance, only the characteristic that a player wants to express through their gameplay. The gameplay is not really about finishing any given stories or beating any pre-written levels, but to make a living in its world, by conquering the land, trading goods,

or by any other possible ways that the system allows, as long as the player is making progress in the time they spend. But, here, “thrownness” is mainly embodied through the game world. In the way that, the cruel land of medieval age that the player is thrown into and the mechanics of the game help determine the player character, despite the great level of freedom.

It is imperative to know that, different levels of “thrownness” do not suggest the quality of any specific aspect of a game, only how much the sense of “thrownness” is from that of the character and that of the surroundings, and how directly is “thrownness” embodied. The reason to categorize would be explained later.



Figure 3. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, “I can’t believe it! You’re... Dragonborn...”



Figure 4. *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*, character customization

Who has been Thrown?

Having the above said, the state of “thrownness” in video games has led us to the question of “who we are” when playing a game of such kind. If we were to assume here that, for games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* in which the level of “thrownness” is one of the highest, it is fair to say that the player is Geralt of Rivia, the main character, not the player themselves while playing the game, regarding that the player would be likely to identify themselves as the character while playing the game, and how the player’s choices are limited within those can reflect Geralt’s own personalities, not the player’s. Then, we could say that the individual traits of the player are nearly “absent” in the game, because all the essential choices that can be made by the player, can as well be possibly made by the preconceived Geralt in the fictional world. That is to say, no matter who the player is or what personalities the player has, the character they

are playing as will always act like the character that is preconceived, as long as the state of “thrownnness” is maintained.

As for games like *Skyrim*, or even *Bannerlord*, where the main character has more to do with what the player wants them to be, one could argue that the player is still absent for the reason that, in such circumstances, “thrownnness” comes mainly from things that surround the player (or should I say the character), which is, also, not for the player to decide. In *Bannerlord*, these things include the context of the world, the rules of the game, listed options on the screen, specific way to interact with the map, items, etc. In *Skyrim*, the case also covers the constant reminder from NPCs of what a hero you are in the dialogues. Hence, the player character here is still conceived in advance due to the abstract and limited nature of video games, but with more unstable factors.

By now, “thrownnness” in video games has guided us to a peculiar situation where the player is nearly absent, as well as the player character (for that the character is controlled by the player). What we have left, is an avatar that acts within the preconceived traits and predetermined structure of the game world they can interact with.

A Potential Tool to Reimagine the “Thrownnness” of our own

Since we say the player is “nearly”, not “totally”, absent, it would be possible that there are still some parts of the player that influences the gameplay. But what determines the factors that affect the choices of a player, and how are we going to understand it, or use it to understand other things, like the “thrownnness” of our own, remain uncertain. As I am concerned, the lower a level of “thrownnness” of a game is, one’s eager to locate on themselves the cause of their

expression in the game is stronger, because the question of “who I am” cannot be simply answered by just looking into one’s character. The question of “who I am”, is now complicated into questions like “do I really play a part”, and “how big the part is”.

If one uses the RPG experience of video games, specifically this state of being thrown into the world, roughly as a model to decipher their own individual human existence, one can interpret the person (how they reveal themselves to and interact with the world) they are as a “character” in the world, and that some other form(s) of agency of the mind (it is not necessary to use the word “soul” yet) that is in control is a “player” from a higher level, just like a player of a game is from a level of reality that is higher than the game. Given the fact that we have so little knowledge of what the “higher level” than our reality is, this tracing back to the source could go on forever, upwardly or downwardly. A player from another level of reality could be a character of another player, from a reality that is at an even higher level. The same can apply in realities of even lower levels. Like, if we see the combat mode in *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* as a sub-game or sub-reality in a reality called “Bannerlord”, the figure that is responding to the player’s command can be seen as a character occupied by the mind of a “player”, who is the character in the game *Bannerlord*, expressing traits that a solider (whether brave or timid) could possibly have on a battlefield. In this way, video games of such kind give us a possible opportunity to recreate our “thrownness” into the real world, and therefore a way to reflect on it.

The Opposite——Illusion of Possibilities that Keeps One Playing

If one indulges themselves in their “thrownness” in a game, things would be quite different, since, for games to be windows to the reflection on one’s “thrownness”, one needs to at least start reflecting on their existence in the game. As Heidegger suggests, death is the

“possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Heidegger 307). While not planning to dig deep into Heidegger’s philosophy, I would like to point out the potential parallels that I found in (personal) experiences of playing video games. As a player, I found some of my most enjoyable experiences in the moments shortly after I am introduced to the system, after I find my and my character’s place in the game world. This is when I inherent the pre-scripted past of my character, envisioning all the possible things I could do with their mindset in the future, having the feeling that there are infinite possibilities for me to explore. While being aware of the fact that I am a character I did not choose to be, I keep playing because I have a feeling of “infinity”. As more and more time is spent in the game, I get familiar with the system. The feeling of “infinity” starts to wear off, which results in, at the ending of the game, I no longer feel like I am the character, and that I am not keeping playing, but only finishing watching the end of an interactive movie and empathizing with the character that I once was.

Due to the finite nature of video games, the feeling of “infinity” could only be an illusion. But what does it mean to be an illusion? If this “infinity” is something that I want to feel while playing a game, and if this “infinity” is something that I have experienced in any way, it must be real. For a game to be infinite, it is not about having infinite choices to be made, but to create a feeling that there are infinite possibilities ahead, even if the feeling is ephemeral. It is not about showing us as many numbers as possible, but about convincing us that there are actually infinite numbers between 0 and 1, without actually listing them to us. Anyhow, it is how much we use to be immersed in a character in a game that eventually causes us to question our “being-in-the-game” when we are no longer the character. For such reasons, “thrownness” in games also has its temporality. But this temporality, namely the destined death of our life of being the character, is what provides the possibility at all.

Conclusion

For many reasons, the terms that I venture to use here might contradict the original meaning given by Martin Heidegger. Nevertheless, all in all, if we use the concept of “thrownness” raised by Heidegger as a starting point to look at games, and then ourselves, we could potentially find ourselves in a new path of understanding. To use a metaphor, this path appears in a way that turns games into fish tanks with reflections of us and our surroundings, if we look at the glass, the thin and transparent plane that divides us from the fish, mindfully. From the reflections on the fish tank, we wonder if we ourselves are as well trapped in a finite tank within another, and that there are many bigger ones, until there is a biggest one to include all of the tanks, including itself. What to be focused on here is not the ongoing process of tracing the root of ourselves in a bigger fish tank, but the fascinating tank which separates the inside from the outside, and that we can create and imagine games, helps us reimagine our own existence.

There are so many other things I would like to talk about regarding this topic. Due to my insufficient of understanding and the length of the essay, those could only be left for another time. But hopefully, I am able to make the tangled thoughts clearer in my mind, and, ideally, to spark more discussions on such topics.

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